

had told Diem and Nhu what the American Government expected of them. The next move, he felt, was theirs. Neither was to make a move until the end of October when Diem invited Lodge to accompany him to the opening of an atomic energy research laboratory. In the meantime there had been a flood of expletives in the government-controlled press about Lodge, Kennedy, and the United States generally. The American press, in particular, was a favorite target for Diem and the Nhūs—and American reporters returned the compliment. During this period there was a “good-will” tour by Madame Nhu to the United States and Western Europe. The photogenic emissary, who was now being referred to as the “Dragon Lady,” lost no chance to appear on television, at women’s clubs, or at political meetings. She and her husband must have suspected that matters were taking a dangerous turn in Vietnam, and her departure from Saigon at this time may have been motivated by the desire to get out while there was still a chance to do so. But since she was accompanied by only one of her children (the others were taken out of Saigon in the care of an American Embassy Officer to join her in Rome after Nhu was murdered), a more likely explanation for her trip at this particular moment would be that she and her husband felt there might be one final, desperate chance to turn American policy around. In any case, her mission was not only unsuccessful, but it exacerbated the anti-Diem/Nhu feeling in the United States. Calling American officers “little soldiers of fortune,” castigating the American press, and casting aspersions on the steadfastness and integrity of the American Government did little to help Diem’s cause.

Madame Nhu was not the only VIP traveling across the Pacific during the early autumn. At a National Security Council meeting in late September it was decided to send Secretary McNamara and General Taylor to Vietnam to get the “facts” on the situation in Saigon. The White House was anxious to avoid, if it could, any speculation that the trip was related to the political crisis in Vietnam. The official announcement made a special point of noting that the Secretary and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs were going on a “military mission.” But efforts to minimize the political implications of the trip beguiled few people either in the

United States or Vietnam. *The New York Times* reported that “The crucial problem facing the Administration was not the temporary state of affairs in the Delta or elsewhere in South Vietnam . . . but a fundamental evaluation of Saigon’s capacity to go on with the war in the light of its unsolved political difficulties.” McNamara and Taylor were expected to provide the President with views which would “help decide further United States policy in dealing with the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem.”²¹

The McNamara-Taylor report to the President was optimistic with respect to the military situation but full of foreboding with respect to political developments. Indeed, the two emissaries said, there were already signs that the Buddhist crisis and the political tensions in Saigon had created hostility among military officers against the Diem regime. Both McNamara and Taylor favored continuing pressure on Saigon for moderation and reform. But according to one presumably knowledgeable source, Roger Hilsman (at the time Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs), they then insisted that the public National Security Council announcement of their findings refer to the fact that the war was going well and that “the Pentagon was right” in its reports of progress.²² In the event, the official White House statement acknowledged, “The military program in South Viet-Nam has made progress and is sound in principle, though improvements are being energetically sought.”²³

Hilsman may have been present at the Council meeting (I was not), and his account of McNamara’s insistence on a White House stamp of approval for the way the war was going may, therefore, reflect his firsthand observations. But I was in the West Basement of the White House when the meeting adjourned and I reviewed the final draft of the statement with Kennedy’s Special Assistant McGeorge Bundy and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy. I was not troubled by the reference to military progress (such statements were now part of the liturgy) but was surprised and outraged over this one: “Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end

of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of U.S. training personnel." ²⁴

This sentence was not only gratuitous, but it was loaded with booby traps. For the past several months the press had been making a convincing case that official reporting on the military situation in Vietnam was overly optimistic. The announcement of the McNamara-Taylor findings was too sanguine in any case. The "Bring-the-boys-home-by-1965" flavor would destroy whatever credibility it had. Both Bundys agreed, but Bill had little elbow room. Finally, in utter exasperation Bill said, "Look, I'm under instructions!" In Washington that closes any argument, unless recourse is taken by tackling the Instructor. Mac called Secretary McNamara, but was unable to persuade him to change his mind. McNamara seemed to have been trapped too; the sentence may have been worked out privately with Kennedy and therefore imbedded in concrete. The words remained, and McNamara and the Administration were to pay a heavy price for them. They were not ignored by the waiting press. VIETNAM VICTORY BY END OF '65 ENVISAGED BY U.S. was *The New York Times* headline on October 3.

The dramatic prediction had the effect of submerging the most significant part of the White House announcement, a somber reflection of the Administration's current views and fears: "The political situation in South Viet-Nam remains deeply serious. The United States has made clear its continuing opposition to any repressive actions in South Viet-Nam. While such actions have not yet significantly affected the military efforts, they could do so in the future." ²⁵

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As part of the last gasp effort to apply pressure on Diem in the late summer and early autumn, the Administration cancelled the funding program for Nhu's Special Forces. Although these troops were designed to be an elite combat unit, the regime had been using them as a Palace Guard. (This was the force which reportedly was used to smash the pagodas during the August reprisals against the Buddhists.) After considerable soul searching and with some

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encouragement from the Senate, Kennedy also cut off American import aid to the Vietnamese Government. This aspect of American economic assistance, known as the Commodity Import Program, amounted to about \$150 million a year. It permitted private Vietnamese firms to import subsidized non-military, largely luxury items which were then sold on the open market. The program was designed to soak up the ever-increasing supply of piasters in circulation. There was considerable doubt, however, that a cut in import aid would have any immediate influence on Diem and Nhu—the warehouses in Saigon were then bulging with consumer goods. There was also some concern that cutting off the flow of such commodities as canned milk would entail real sacrifice on the part of the most innocent and helpless of the Vietnamese population. I can remember a lively debate at a White House staff meeting on the issue of whether to continue subsidizing the import of milk and medicine, but I believe these items too were included in the embargo. In order that the Diem regime would have an opportunity to make concessions as gracefully as possible, no publicity was given in Washington to the elimination of import aid. But Nhu himself announced the aid cut and asserted that the Vietnamese were prepared to carry on the good fight without American help.

Although such pressures from Washington had little or no tangible effect on the course of events in Vietnam during the last critical weeks of October, they did have a major psychological effect. For the first time since 1954 the United States had taken a definite step to demonstrate its opposition to the policies of the Saigon regime. It was now clear to Vietnamese officials and the populace generally that Washington would not remain supine if Diem ignored or flouted requests for major changes in policy and improvements in performance. Most importantly, it provided a clear signal to those Vietnamese opposing Diem that the United States was not automatically, irrevocably, and indefinitely committed to supporting the present regime.

The next act of the tragedy was played out with more passion, plot and counter-plot, internecine struggles, and awesome offstage noises than any dramatist could have contrived. The cast featured